Fairy Tales in a Soviet Reality

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From stories that function as moral compasses to those that tell fantastical tales of heroes and princesses kidnapped by flying genies, children's literature goes beyond entertainment and moral education. Instead, such literature fundamentally reflects societies' particular values and ideals, just as it did in both imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. In this way, Russian tales differ drastically from those of the Soviet Union – proven by comparing Tsar Saltan to Karlsson or the heroic Ruslan to the accordion playing Crocodile Gena. After the revolution, kingdoms that lay *za tridevat zemel* evolved into adventures to the moon, while the *lukamorie* became a storytelling washbin.[1] As stories grew and changed between the two empires, promises of princesses shifted into promises of equality. Eventually, it became apparent that imperial Russian tales reflected monarchical principles and hierarchies' importance, while Soviet tales emphasized the crucial tenets of cooperation and camaraderie.

Throughout the Soviet Union's existence—from the Bolshevik Revolution until its collapse in 1991—children's literature evolved to fit the proper ideals of the state. However, this

[1] Tsar Saltan - a character from Aleksander Pushkin's *Tale of Tsar Saltan* who rules a kingdom created by a magical swan, Karlsson – a character with a mechanical propellor connected to his back, Ruslan – a hero who rescues his ladylove from an evil genie in Pushkin's *Rulsan i Lyudmila*, Crocodile Gena – a crocodile who is best friends with a bear-creature Cheburashka, and "lukamorie" – a magical tree that houses stories, first written about by Pushkin

did not mean it was stripped of its imaginative and vivid elements which were present in pre-revolutionary Russia. Instead, those creative storytelling elements were woven into ideological principles, making the medium of children's literature far more than propaganda. It became a space reflecting the past, present, and future. However, what was the purpose of the change? Was it to remove all traces of pre-revolutionary Russia? Or was it solely intended to push the Soviet Union into the future? What did the government intend to accomplish?

The answer to these questions ultimately lies in the words of Nikolai Bukharin, "the salvation of the young mind and freeing of it from the noxious reactionary beliefs of parents is one of the highest aims of the proletarian government".[2] The government sought to adapt children's literature to properly fit the ideology of the communist party, seeing how youth would be most susceptible to such a shift in ideals. In this, they were incredibly successful ensuring the presence of the appropriate Soviet values.[3] Through propaganda, censorship, and the threat of social disapproval, the government tried to safeguard the ideological cleanliness of both adults and children.[4] Writers and illustrators of that time were expected to adhere to an "internal redactor" within many publishing companies, which dictated what was allowed or inversely disallowed to be published;[5] those who adhered to official ideology received state recognition, while those who did not were punished or excluded from publishing entirely. Eventually, through this extensive process of censorship, the content and themes within Soviet children's literature changed in reflection of the ideological imperative to indoctrinate "little comrades".[6]

These tendencies of indoctrination are set in stone, so instead, the focus delves into the evolution of children's literature and its reflection of a growing duality between tradition and

[2] Rothenstein, *Inside the Rainbow*, 15.
[3] O'Dell, *Socialisation through Children's Literature,* 135.
[4] Raskolnikov, *Review*, 437.
[5] —, 437.
[6] Goscilo, *The Thorny Thicket*, 346.

modernity, as shown in the gap between the aforementioned characters,[7] the tensions of the old versus the new, fairy tale versus reality. Such a divide also manifests through the historiographies surrounding this topic – the Soviet state was attempting to simultaneously shed its imperial Russian legacy and establish itself as a modern, independent state, making it challenging to assign a single, entirely accurate perspective to this complex narrative.

The primary debate surrounding children's literature in the Soviet Union lies in the alteration of old Russian values, most clearly exemplified in the censorship of fairy tales.[8] Fairy tales, in this context, refer to a story that often includes magical or fantastical elements, moral lessons, and archetypal characters. Felix Raskalnikov, as well as Felicity O'Dell, note that for many in the Soviet Union, the fairy tales were rooted in folklore and a reminder of a cultural heritage which needed to be discarded in favor of a new, more apt reflection of the Soviet state and its revolutionary culture. In imperial Russia, *skazki*, or fairy tales, featured mythical creatures, heroic quests, and lessons of morality in the scope of monarchist principles – a clear demonstration of the necessity of the Soviet Union's overhaul of tradition.[9]

Essentially, the Soviet regime saw these *skazki* as harkening back to Russian culture and values of individualism, religious superstition, and monarchism – all laden with imperial symbolism and thereby detrimental to the Soviet ideal.[10] In the Soviet mind, they could become dangerous tools for political allegories which would be used to overturn the Soviet state itself. To rid themselves of such dangers, the Soviets manipulated those fairy tales and "decoded" them to see hidden messages that highlighted the virtues of socialism while simultaneously warning against the inevitable pitfalls of capitalism. The wicked Baba Yaga became nothing more than a

[7] Tsar Saltan, Ruslan, and Lyudmila versus Malysh, Karrlyson, Cheburashka, and Crocodile Gena
[8] Maslinskaya, *Inheritance and the Inherited*, 237.
[9] Goscilo, *The Thorny Thicket*, 345.
[10] Doniger, *Soviet Education*, 165.

superstitious failure of society while the greedy king evolved into a capitalist exploiter. Furthermore, the virtuous, hardworking, even heroic protagonist morphed into an embodiment of the socialist ideal. Therefore, the campaign to reinterpret and even revise the traditional fairy tales was successful because tales once associated with aristocracies and monarchies were transformed into narratives celebrating ordinary people. Such adaptations often entirely changed the meaning of stories, as in the example of Ivan the Fool being renamed Ivan the Cunning to exalt the "normalcy" of the proletariat.[11] In another popular children's story, the bourgeois becomes an enemy as an old woman who boards a train is ridiculed for her extensive list of baggage, "the sofa, the suitcase, the traveling bag, basket, and picture and box" – subliminally mocking all holdovers from the "bad old days of private property".[12] The story's narrator, however, is heroic because he only has one bag – everything else he shares, like a good communist.

To further propagate their ideology and to fill the vacancy left by the stories removed, the government promoted the ideal of socialist realism. This doctrine which mandated the literary portrayal of an optimistic, idealistic, and prosocial vision of Soviet life. O'Dell describes it as a commitment to depict the natural world in a solely positive light, highlighting the achievements and contributions of the working class to build a socialist society, a motion to negate the past and build a new form of children's literature. The transformation of literature in the Soviet Union, according to O'Dell, especially concerning children's literature, centered on the idea that it was a deliberate process – one designed to fall in line with the current propaganda. Modernization and industrialization as central themes reflected the achievements and aspirations of the new socialist society.

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[11] O'Dell, *Socialisation through Children's Literature,*13.
[12] Steiner, *Stories for Little Comrades*, 54.

As a literary scholar and historian of this era, O'Dell posits that this process was an attempt to move away from the legacy of imperial Russia; it was necessary to eliminate anything reminiscent of the old and thereby remove the Soviet Union from any leftover, undue influence. To her, children's literature had become entirely about moral education. As the values, such as collectivism and loyalty, upheld by the government were absent from traditional fairy tales, the *skazki* came to be viewed as too excessively fantastical and fundamentally incompatible with both Soviet and Marxist ideology.[13] The *skazki* was seen to harbor pessimistic ideals and corrupt viewpoints, and thus incompatible with the Soviet notion that "all works [had to] be optimistic [because] Marx has proven the ultimate inevitability of the Good Society…so the art of socialist realism must consciously reflect the triumph of new over old".[14] Therefore, they had to be removed and replaced by socialist realism. In essence, O'Dell finds that children's literature directly reflected the strength of modernity and the failures of imperial Russia – the destruction and departure from the old in search of the new.

On the other hand, Simon Doniger presents an alternative interpretation of the Soviet treatment of fairy tales. He does not fundamentally disagree with O'Dell because they both agree that for the government, fairy tales were deemed excessively superstitious and fantastical, "too sentimentally romantic".[15] Even though O'Dell notes that modifying and removing fairy tales and replacing themes in stories contributed to the emphasis on specific Soviet virtues, Doniger asserts that these themes were not the predominant reason for the removal of fairy tales. Instead, he views government's motivations as a means of propelling the Soviet Union into the future – and unlike O'Dell, the motivation is not a fear of the past but an anticipation of the future. By removing fairy tales and creating socialist realism, Soviet propaganda endeavored to modify and

[13] O'Dell, *Socialisation through Children's Literature,* 5.
[14] —, 6.
[15] Doniger, *Soviet Education*, 166.

"revolutionize" human nature,[16] which was viewed to be far too prone to fits of sentimentality and romanticism.[17] Instead, Doniger argues that this aimed to create a more rational, reasonable generation fueled by a motivation to begin anew. The goal was to revolutionize moral values, not to sever ties entirely from the old. In this way, the government's achievements in industry and technology would serve as markers of the future instead of being built on the foundations of the past.

In this, both O'Dell and Doniger view traditional fairy tales as fundamentally incompatible with the Soviet agenda because of their nostalgic value and their fantastical, romantic nature. Even so, O'Dell's perspective seems more likely to be within the overall scope of the Soviet agenda. It stands to reason that while the government attempted to begin anew to create an ideological empire, it also *had* to step away from all it had been. Otherwise, it simply would not have been able to create the empire that it did; modifying traditional stories into something closer to the correct ideological values was simply the first step.

However, while the removal of fairy tales was absolutely a step in achieving proper moral education, there could, as Doniger suggests, been other motivations for the removal of fairy tales. From modifying the basis of human nature to censoring any mentions of imperialism and tradition, Doniger's perspective adds another layer to the understanding of Soviet literature. The truth is that fairy tales were likely censored, in part, to emphasize the educational aspect of Soviet literature in the theme of morality and to instill collectivist values in children, but also to distance them from the past their parents and grandparents had lived through. Therefore, when used together, the perspectives of both O'Dell and Doniger serve as reasonable explanations for the government's actions.

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[16] Doniger, *Soviet Education*, 162.
[17] —, 164.

Just as the Soviet Union introduced socialist realism to replace the void left by the no-longer-suitable fairy tales, the themes of modernity and industrialization replaced fable and fantasy. The thematic presence of machinery evolved to replace the traditional fairy tale hero – an anthropomorphic machine with humanoid capabilities - as a protagonist.[18] The development of this emphasis on machinery emerged during the Soviet Union's rapid industrialization, most likely to ensure the ideological alignment of the youth with the goals of scientific progress. At this time, children's literature gradually began to feature themes centered around technological progress, portraying their protagonists as characters who played active roles in building and maintaining factories and machines, and contributing to industrial advancement. For example, stories such as Yuri Druzhkov's *The Adventures of Pencil and Screwbolt*, as well as *Na Zavode*[19], blended fantasy and reality, depicting machines as personified machines and anthropomorphizing them.[20] This personification, ultimately, served the purpose of reinforcing the message of progress and advancement through technology.

Such a push was not done through literature alone. Moreover, the illustrations and imagery accompanying these narratives were equally important to the push toward the "power of machinery". Often, these illustrations incorporated elements of both the Constructivist and Futurist art movements,[21] emphasizing geometric shapes and abstract design to convey a sense of modernity, just as they do in Dmitri Bulanov's illustration for *How They Build.*[22] In that specific illustration, which rather accurately reflects many others of its kind, human depictions are barely recognizable, having blocky limbs and features. At the same time, machines and technologies

[18] Steiner, *Stories for Little Comrades*, 69.
[19] —, 77.
[20] Druzhkov, *The Adventures of Pencil and Screwbolt*, 1.
[21] Rothenstein, *Inside the Rainbow*, 135.
[22] —, 93.

rise above them in a detailed, realistic fashion. The message here is clear - machines are at the forefront, while people and nature fall flat.

In response to the distancing from nature, Julian Rothenstein provides a nuanced perspective of the government's motivations –the primary objective was not solely ideological alignment but rather a deliberate effort to eliminate natural sentimentality and humanism from children's literature. By removing any recognizable human features from illustrations (and subsequently literature), the government would purge the Soviet "imagination of all sentimentality" and inclinations towards humanism.[23] Sentimentality and emotionality were hindrance, and in removing them, a much more direct conveyance of ideological messages emerged. Rothenstein's approach suggests traditional, more emotional elements, especially the ones associated with and demonstrated in folktales and fairy tales, actually diluted the impact of socialist realism. Although it seems counterintuitive, any sappy elements that might evoke emotional attachment to the characters would distract the readers from the fundamental morals and teachings of the stories and lead them to focus on unimportant aspects of the stories, in the grand scheme of plot and storyline. This proved counterproductive to the government's goals of shaping a new generation aligned with communist ideals. In response, the government established a clear distinction between the natural and the mechanical world.[24] The emphasis on science and rationality, as opposed to the former religious and superstitious thinking of the past, for Rothenstein, serves to convey a clear message. There is no more old Russia, no more of those old values that are associated with it. The old values should be eliminated and to create a push towards modernity and technological progress that serves the Soviet Union.

[23] Rothenstein, *Inside the Rainbow,* 21.
[24] —, 21.

Evgeny Steiner, however, disagrees with Rothenstein's analysis. To him, the thematic mechanization of literature was not necessarily departing from the themes of nature and humanism. However, instead, it was to break "the nets of scholasticism" and away from all that is theoretical and inapplicable.[25] Through the mechanical humanoids, the readers of these books become emotionally attached and connected to something physical, and, in consequence,

> "the more perfect individual of the highly cultured society…will feel that he is one of the crucial links, one of the crucial engines of a natural world that he himself has put in order; he will be as automatic nature itself."[26]

In essence, Steiner finds that all this was not to separate man from nature but was not intended to remove all humanity from the push for technological progress. Instead, the government, intending to unify the old and the new, would make children feel unified with the world. Then, feeling as one with the world of progress, they become more likely to contribute more within the scope of the Soviet, and at the same time, individualism is eliminated. Everybody and everything are as one.[27] It is a fundamental disposal of individualism in portraying human beings - not a departure from the past, but a push for progress into the future.

Ultimately, when comparing Steiner and Rosenstein's perspectives, one will find that they disagree on the basic premise of what the government was trying to do. There is little crossover between the two perspectives, with Rothenstein's view being much more concrete in its purge of emotionality and Steiner's a more abstract historical perspective of welding the old and new together. However, it seems more reasonable that Steiner's perspective more accurately describes the government. The government certainly had an incentive to align the values instilled in children with their objectives of technological progress, and the best way to ensure that was to

[25] Steiner, *Stories for Little Comrades*, 68.
[26] —, 68.
[27] —, 74.

create an emotional connection between children and mechanization. It was not a removal that harkened back to the past, but instead, a wholly new embarking into the future.

Through the perspectives of O'Dell and Doniger, as well as that of Steiner and Rothenstein, it becomes clear that the dichotomy between traditionalism and modernity only grew as it followed the broader socio-political transformations of the era. The contrast in historiography itself mirrors the ongoing struggle between whether the Soviet Union was trying to move away from the past or move into the future. O'Dell and Rothenstein perceive children's literature as a push for the Soviet Union not to be a reinterpretation of the Russian past. At the same time, Doniger and Steiner see it as a movement to create an entirely separate, modern entity. Although neither perspective perfectly encapsulates all that the government was trying to do through children's literature, it seems reasonable to claim that the Soviet Union was trying to move away from the baggage of imperial Russia while also establishing itself as a wholly individual, modernized state. It certainly could do both.

By juxtaposing traditional folklore and fairy tales with narratives celebrating the new practices of mass-scale industrialization and machinery, each action became a paradoxical push-pull force between the deeply rooted tradition ingrained in the collective consciousness and the modernity championed by the Soviet government.

However, even with all the intricacies of symbolism in children's literature of the time, fundamentally, it was created to entertain children. The most basic tenets of friendship, love, and morality remained the same as universal themes that transcended political regimes and societal shifts. Perhaps this itself is symbolic – the same basic principles hold true no matter the political status of a country, the location, ideological alignment, or drastic social changes. Stories hold the collective wisdom of the past, promising to bring it with them into the future.

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